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ABSTRACT

A total of 116 mothers of preschool children and 230 female college students responded to a 60-question survey designed to assess attitudes and opinions concerning physical child abuse in four categories: legal issues, treatment issues, behaviors constituting child abuse, and attitudes toward physical discipline. Students were significantly more lenient than mothers in attitudes and opinions in all four categories. Demographic variables, such as marital status and education, were significantly related to attitudes held by mothers. Students majoring in math-science, humanities, and professional studies were significantly more lenient than social science majors. Class level and family occupational level were also significant factors in students' opinions. Respondents generally supported current legislation and court interpretations of abuse and, to a lesser extent, current treatment practices. Responses indicated a consistency of opinions and attitudes across the four categories assessed. (Author/RH)

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COMPARISON OF OPINIONS AND ATTITUDES OF MOTHERS OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN AND FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS TOWARD PHYSICAL CHILD ABUSE

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ABSTRACT

One hundred-sixteen mothers of preschool children and 230 female college students responded to a sixty question survey designed to assess attitudes and opinions concerning physical child abuse in four categories: legal issues, treatment issues, behaviors constituting child abuse and attitudes toward physical discipline. Students were significantly more lenient in attitudes and opinions in all four categories. Demographic variables such as marital status and education were significantly related to attitudes held by mothers. Students majoring in math-science, humanities, and professional studies were significantly more lenient than social science majors. Class level and family occupational level were also significant factors in students' opinions. Respondents generally supported current legislation and court interpretations of abuse and, to a lesser extent, current treatment practices. Responses indicated a consistency of opinions and attitudes across the four categories assessed.

COMPARISON OF OPINIONS AND ATTITUDES OF MOTHERS OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN AND FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS TOWARD PHYSICAL CHILD ABUSE

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INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of research on child abuse has focused on such topics as causes of child abuse and therapeutic issues [1,2,3,4,5]. One of the areas of research that has been relatively neglected is that of public opinion concerning physical child abuse. What does the American public consider abusive behavior? What legal actions and treatments are deemed appropriate? Are attitudes toward physical discipline related to attitudes toward physical child abuse? Answers to these questions may be important to public policy makers, legislators, law enforcement officials, and those who work with children and their families such as teachers, social workers, physicians and other health professionals.

Opinions and attitudes of the American public toward physical child abuse in recent years have been shaped from the dramatic accounts in the mass media. Reports of gross malnutrition, torture, burnings, and murder may give the American public a false impression of the type of abuse that exists in most cases. Actually, most abused children have lesser injuries that do not fit this description [6]. What

the general public actually considers to be abusive behavior on the part of the parent is relatively unknown.

All fifty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands have legislation similiar to the Child Prevention and Treatment Act passed by the United States Congress in 1974. Definitions of abusive behavior vary from state to state, but all consider child abuse to be non-accidental physical injury. All states stipulate mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse by professionals working with children and provide immunity for the reporter. Some states also encourage other persons to report even though they are not legally required to do so [7]. In general, the state courts have assumed the position that parents can punish their children with moderation and for the child's welfare without maliciously inflicting traumatic injuries [8]. It is often assumed in the American political system that legislation reflects the beliefs shared by large numbers of people [9]. Opinions concerning the legal aspects of child abuse should then be supportive of the present legislation in the United States.

Decisions concerning child abuse require an extreme level of commitment from communities and an examination of standards that are set for parental care. According to Hayes professionals have established that the abusive family is in need of some type of therapy. Studies have shown that the vast majority of abusive parents can be helped by a proper treatment program. In addition, children who have witnessed abuse in their family require some type of therapy [10].

In the last decade, a multidisciplinary approach to therapy consisting of medical personnel, social workers and psychologists has received great support from the many professionals involved in child abuse cases. It might be assumed if the type of therapy recommended by professionals is congruent with the opinions of the community in which it takes place, then successful treatment may be more likely to occur [11]. Does the recommended multidisciplinary therapy receive support from the American public?

In colonial times, American parents treated children as property and were given the right to discipline the children as they deemed appropriate [12]. Over the last few decades there has been a general decline in the emphasis on the use of physical discipline in the American culture. However, studies have shown that abusive parents use corporal punishment to a greater degree than non-abusive parents [13]. Within the general public there may also be a relationship between one's attitudes toward physical discipline and one's attitudes toward issues of child abuse.

The present study focused on a comparison of the opinions and attitudes toward child abuse by two segments of the American population - mothers of preschool age children and college age female students. The expectation was that these two groups would differ in their attitudes toward child abuse as a result of their level of experience with children. The attitudes assessed were divided into four categories: behaviors constituting child abuse, legal aspects, treatment issues, and attitudes toward physical discipline.

METHOD

Sample

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire given to 116 mothers whose preschool age children were enrolled in two preschools and 230 female students enrolled in various courses at California State University, Northridge. Students who were mothers and male students were eliminated from analysis.

Measure

The researchers developed a questionnaire which consisted of sixty questions of which eleven questions concerned eight demographic variables seeking information about age, education, socioeconomic status, etc. The remaining 49 questions were designed to measure attitudes and opinions in four categories: what behaviors constitute child abuse (12 questions), legal aspects of child abuse (12 questions), treatment issues (7 questions), and attitudes toward physical discipline (12 questions). Example questions designed to measure the four categories are as follows:

What constitutes child abuse

Locking a child in a closet is a form of child abuse.

If a child misbehaves, it is alright to withhold his/her meal.

Legal questions

All states should have mandated reporting statutes.

If a child dies as a result of abuse the individual should be able to plead temporary insanity.

Treatment issues

Abused children need psychological treatment.

A child abuser should be treated and reunited with the child.

Attitudes toward the use of physical discipline

If a child continually disobeys, he/she should be spanked.

If either parent is disciplining a child, the other parent must not interfere.

Subjects were asked to respond to each statement on a five point Likert-like scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The responses were rated 1 to 5 respectively to indicate a more restricted/rigid attitude (less acceptance of liberal interpretations of legal and treatment issues and behaviors constituting child abuse and less emphasis on the use of physical discipline) or lenient/lax attitude (a broader range of acceptance of interpretations of legal and treatment issues and behaviors constituting child abuse and more emphasis on the use of physical discipline). To avoid the formation of a response set to answering the questions, some questions were worded so that "strongly agree" indicated a lenient/lax attitude; these responses were reversed for statistical analysis. The questionnaire was pilot tested and modified.

Results

Sixty-eight percent of the mothers were in the 26 to 36 year age group and 29 percent were in the 37 to 45 year age group. Ninety-two percent of the students fell into the

typical student age range of 17 to 25 years. In comparison to the 1980 United States census data [14] both students and mothers were found to have higher household incomes than the national average. The mothers were better educated and less likely to be divorced than the typical woman in the United States. The vast majority (82 percent) of both students and mothers were from white collar and/or professional occupational families.

Reliability analysis (coefficient alpha) indicated that 6 attitudes questions should be eliminated from the study; therefore, these questions were not analyzed further. Responses to the statements resulted in numerical scores for each of the four categories of attitudes plus an overall total score.

The Student t test indicated that mothers and female students differed significantly on all four categories of attitudes. Students were significantly ($p<.05$) more lenient/lax than mothers on what behaviors constitute child abuse, legal and treatment issues and attitudes toward physical discipline (see Table 1).

The demographic variables in relation to the four categories of attitudes were analyzed using the analysis of variance (ANOVA, $p<.05$) program of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. When ANOVA indicated significance in one or more of the four attitude categories in relation to a demographic variable the t test ($p<.05$) and the Scheffe test ($p<.10$) were used to pinpoint significance.

Age and the woman's individual income did not have a

significant impact on any of the four attitude categories for either mothers or female students. However, household income (income of the entire family) was significantly related to what behaviors constitute child abuse for students [ANOVA, $\underline{F}$ (4,223) = 2.960] but not for mothers. Students with household incomes under $10,000 were more lenient/lax than students with household incomes of $25,000 to $49,999 [$\underline{t}$ (91) = 2.80, Scheffe = 7.84] or over $100,000 [$\underline{t}$ (43) = 2.20]. Also, students with household incomes of $10,000 to $24,999 were more lenient/lax than those having household incomes of $25,000 to $49,999 [$\underline{t}$ (116) = 2.06].

Education was found to be significant in relation to one of four attitude categories for both mothers and students. Mothers with a four year college degree were found to be significantly more lenient/lax than mothers with two years or less of college on legal issues [ANOVA, $\underline{F}$ (3,108) = 2.825; $\underline{t}$ (73) = 2.49; Scheffe = 6.45]. Students with a BS/BA degree were significantly more lenient/lax than students with an AA degree or some college on what behaviors constitute child abuse [ANOVA, $\underline{F}$ (2,226) = 3.092; $\underline{t}$ (214) = 2.56; Scheffe = 6.55].

Marital status was not significant for students on any of the four categories of attitudes. However, marital status was significant on the questions as to what constitutes child abuse for mothers [ANOVA, $\underline{F}$ (2,112) = 4.822]. Divorced mothers were significantly more lenient/lax on what behaviors constitute child abuse than were married mothers [$\underline{t}$ (110) = 3.31; Scheffe = 10.96] and those in the "other" categories

of marital status [t (5) = 5.14; Scheffe = 26.42]. In addition, married mothers were more lenient/lax than the "other" category [t (109) = 3.69; Scheffe = 13.62]. On treatment aspects, divorced mothers were significantly more lenient/lax than the "other" category of mothers [ANOVA, F (2,111) = 3.171; t (5) = 3.37; Scheffe = 11.70]. Also, married mothers were more lenient/lax toward treatment issues than the group classified as "other" [t (108) = 3.01; Scheffe = 9.06].

While family occupational level was not significant for mothers, it was found to be significant for students on treatment issues [ANOVA, F (4,225) = 2.883]. Students from skilled worker families were significantly more lenient/lax for treatment issues than students from white collar [t (143) = 2.11] or professional families [t (90) = 3.05; Scheffe = 9.30].

Class level for students was found to be significant in relation to treatment aspects [ANOVA, F (4,225) = 2.800]. Students who were freshmen were significantly more lenient/lax than juniors [t (117) = 3.19; Scheffe = 10.18] or seniors [t (98) = 3.08; Scheffe = 9.49].

While the results of students by major are complex, the overall ANOVA results indicate that the students' major impacted upon the attitudes in all four categories. The t test and Scheffe results indicate that professional studies majors such as business and engineering [ANOVA, F (4.223) = 7.920; t (169) = 4.96; Scheffe = 24.60], humanities majors such as art and literature [t (72) = 4.06; Scheffe = 16.48] and other

majors such as liberal studies, special major, or undecided [t (62) = 2.86; Scheffe = 8.18] were significantly more lenient/lax than social science majors such as psychology, child development and sociology on total scores (see Table 2).

The combined mean responses of both mothers and students on individual questions within the four categories were used to indicate a general agreement or disagreement with the statements. In the category of behaviors constituting child abuse there was a general agreement that physical discipline resulting in internal injuries (M = 1.316; SD = .893), bruises and contusions (M = 1.431; SD = .774) and locking a child in a closet (M = 1.379; SD = .890) constituted child abuse. Respondents only moderately agreed that withholding a meal (M = 1.936; SD = .866), spanking or hitting a child with a belt or stick (M = 1.971; SD = .941) was abusive. Respondents generally did not consider shaking a child (M = 2.347; SD = 1.019), or slapping the child in the face or buttocks (M = 3.286; SD = .892) as abusive behavior.

Concerning legal aspects respondents generally agreed that all states should have mandated reporting statutes (M = 1.510; SD = .720), that statewide (M = 1.569; SD = .893) and county and local agencies (M = 1.266; SD = .574) should be established to receive and investigate child abuse, that private citizens should report abuse (M = 1.624; SD = .760) and that the reporter should be protected against civil and criminal action (M = 1.538; SD = .754). While the subjects agreed that an abuser should be given a jail sentence (M = 1.451; SD = .812) and be considered a murderer if the

child dies as a result of abuse (M = 1.335; SD = .704), they did not support the death penalty for these abusers (M = 3.113; SD = 1.122). In general, the subjects supported the concept of societal intervention in child abuse cases, but they did not support the increase in taxation to provide for prevention programs (M = 3.338; SD = 1.103).

Concerning treatment issues respondents agreed that abused children need psychological treatment (M = 1.616; SD = .798). Moderate support was given to the multidisciplinary approach to treatment of abusive families (M = 2.246; SD = .957). Respondents generally disagreed with the statement that child abusers should be treated and reunited with the child (M = 3.145; SD = .955).

In attitudes toward physical discipline the mothers and students were relatively lenient/lax toward the use of spanking to teach a child safety rules (M = 3.171; SD = 1.051) and also felt that parents who use spanking need not feel remorse or guilt (M = 3.185; SD = 1.027). However, they felt rather strongly that children needed some of their natural meanness taken out of them (M = 1.913; SD = .968).

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to compare the responses of mothers and students combined on the four categories of attitudes. There was a significant correlation between treatment and legal issues (p = .001), treatment issues and behaviors constituting child abuse (p = .001), legal issues and attitudes toward physical discipline (p = .003), legal issues and behaviors constituting child abuse (p = .001) and attitudes toward physical discipline and

behaviors constituting child abuse (p = .001). There was no significant correlation between treatment issues and attitudes toward physical discipline (p = .111).

DISCUSSION

Since the subjects were better educated and had higher incomes than the United States averages, they were somewhat atypical of the general American public. However, it is important to study this group because they may be more politically and socially active compared with less educated and lower income groups and, therefore, have greater influence on policy makers such as legislators. Future studies should include fathers and non-parent males as well as subjects from a greater variety of incomes, ethnic, and geographical groups in order to make judgments for the entire American public.

The mothers were significantly more restricted/rigid in their attitudes compared to the non-parent student females. Apparently, the status of parenthood had an impact on the attitudes toward child abuse. Mothers, perhaps because of their actual experience with children, held stronger or better differentiated opinions on child abuse. Students, having no such experience, may have responded to the questions from a more theoretical viewpoint.

The results were somewhat inconsistent concerning the demographic variables. The researchers feel that the impact of household income, education, and marital status warrant further study. Family occupational level and household income

were important variables in the attitudes of the students, with students coming from low income and working class backgrounds holding the most lenient attitudes. It appears that students with the most coursework and the greatest academic background in the social science disciplines hold the most restricted/rigid attitudes. Rigidity of attitudes is not often associated with social science students, but familiarity with the issues of child abuse seem to have led to rigid or more delimitated opinions in this particular area. Overall, the educational process has some impact upon the formation of attitudes and opinions concerning child abuse.

Generally, the subjects held a fairly realistic view of what behaviors constitute child abuse. The respondents generally supported the court interpretation of child abuse; that is, a parent can use physical punishment with moderation such as spanking and slapping but not to the point that it inflicts observable injury. While the media has concentrated on spectacular cases, the subjects did seem to be aware that abuse can occur to lesser degrees.

In general, the respondents supported governmental intervention legislation in child abuse cases. Furthermore, they supported mandatory reporting by private citizens which is not specified in all state laws and which might be a possible area for legislation. The lack of support for the death penalty in abuse cases where the child dies probably reflects a negative attitude toward capital punishment in general rather than specifically for child abusers. Also, the resistance to increased taxation for prevention programs may be

related to the "taxpayers' revolt" evident in the United States in recent years.

The subjects agreed that in abuse cases the child should be separated from the family and placed in foster care or the home of a relative. Reuniting the child and parent, even after therapy, and the multidisciplinary treatment approach received lesser support. If therapy can be successful with abusive families, as research indicates, then professionals need to promote this concept to the general public.

The significant correlation between the sub-categories of attitudes, except between treatment issues and attitudes toward physical discipline, indicate a consistency of opinions and attitudes toward the many aspects of child abuse. If an individual responded with a strong conviction as to behaviors constituting child abuse, then she also responded with a strict interpretation of the law and of treatment issues. Therefore, there appears to be a predictability in the responses.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

The researchers feel that an assessment of community attitudes should be the first step in developing legislation, educational, and therapeutic programs. Local standards for parenting practices, definitions of child abuse, and treatment approaches require congruency with the community's attitudes in order for interventions to be successful. The questionnaire can be a helpful tool in measuring these attitudes.

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Table 1

Analysis of Responses to Attitude Categories of Mothers and Students Compared

	Treatment	Legal	Attitudes	What constitutes	Total
Students	M=2.37 + - SD=.36 A	M=2.08 + - SD=.40 C	M=2.75 + - SD=.60 E	M=2.00 + - SD=.37 G	M=2.30 + - SD=.30 I
Mothers	M=2.28 + - SD=.37 B	M=1.94 + - SD=.41 D	M=2.46 + - SD=.64 F	M=1.82 + - SD=.33 H	M=2.10 + - SD=.31 J
	C-2.33 CR-1.97 Sig	C-2.96 CR-1.97 Sig	C-4.25 CR-1.97 Sig	C-4.49 CR-1.97 Sig	C-5.60 CR-1.97 Sig

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, C = computed Student t score, CR = criterion value, Sig = significant by Student t test $p<0.05$. Pairwise comparisons of all groups were made by the Student t test. Pairs significant by Student t: A-B, C-D, E-F, G-H, I-J.

Table 2

Students' Responses to Attitude Categories by Major

Major	Treatment	Legal	Attitudes	What constitutes	Total
Social science	M=2.22 + - SD=.34 A	M=1.91 + - SD=.40 F	M=2.43 + - SD=.62 K	M=1.85 + - SD=.35 P	M=2.09 + - SD=.30 U
Science/ Math	M=2.39 + - SD=.53 B	M=2.01 + - SD=.29 G	M=3.08 + - SD=.58 L	M=2.13 + - SD=.51 Q	M=2.40 + - SD=.35 V
Professional studies	M=2.42 + - SD=.36 C	M=2.12 + - SD=.40 H	M=2.84 + - SD=.58 M	M=2.03 + - SD=.35 R	M=2.34 + - SD=.27 W
Humanities	M=2.41 + - SD=.32 D	M=2.18 + - SD=.47 I	M=2.79 + - SD=.51 N	M=2.14 + - SD=.37 S	M=2.37 + - SD=.28 X
Other	M=2.40 + - SD=.26 E	M=2.14 + - SD=.31 J	M=2.78 + - SD=.57 O	M=1.94 + - SD=.36 T	M=2.31 + - SD=.25 Y
Total	M=2.37 + - SD=.36	M=2.08 + - SD=.40	M=2.75 + - SD=.60	M=2.00 + - SD=.37	M=2.30 + - SD=.30
	C-2.815 CR-2.41 Sig	C-3.053 CR-2.41 Sig	C-5.193 CR-2.41 Sig	C-3.719 CR-2.41 Sig	C-7.920 CR-2.41 Sig

Note. M = mean, SD = standard deviation, C = computed Anova value, CR = criterion value, Sig = significant by Anova $p<0.05$. Pairwise comparisons of all groups were made by Student t and Scheffe methods. Pairs significant by Student t, $p<0.05$: A-C, A-D, A-E, F-H, F-I, F-J, K-L, K-M, K-N, K-O, P-R, P-S, U-V, U-W, U-X, U-Y. Pairs significant by Scheffe, $p<0.10$: A-C, F-H, K-M, P-R, U-W, K-L, P-S, U-W, U-X, U-Y.